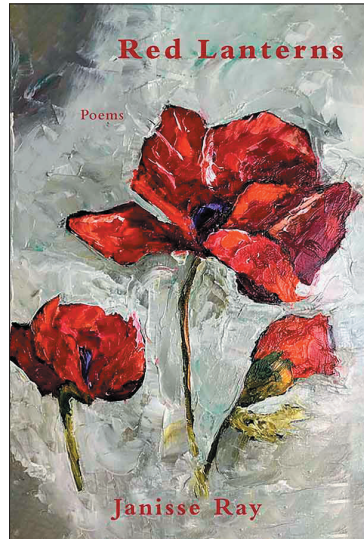


Red Lanterns, by Janisse Ray
Iris Press, 2021, 82 pages, \$18.00
<https://irisbooks.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Red-Lanterns.jpg>

Reviewed by Steven Croft

For readers of Janisse Ray's poetry, *Red Lanterns*, her second volume, has many pleasures and a great seriousness. On first reading the book, I thought, "This is a poet who loves life and the world's beauty so much there is a soul-deep sense of loss and fear here." But first, some of its pleasures before the heavier seriousness. I always like writers with the skill to call to mind other great literary writers because of the enjoyment of recognizing similarity. Reading through *Red Lanterns* I was struck by the Hardyian sorrow of "The Baby within Her," the grim Dickensian determinism of "Miscarriage," the Wordsworthian joy -- as one critic aptly put it, "the poet no longer as creator of laws or fictions, but as brother to what is" (James Phillips, "Wordsworth and the Fraternity of Joy," *New Literary History Journal*, Summer 2010) -- of "Crucifix." With the poem "Trees," the "religious" completeness of Ray's adoration is Merwin-like. Though an evocation -- something she obviously shares with W.S. Merwin -- rather than an invocation of him, this poem involves another great pleasure of this book and all of Janisse Ray's writing: her heart-felt description and love of nature.



Having found these similarities, I don't mean to say Janisse Ray's poetry is in any way imitative -- it is vigorous, varied, and, though similar in themes to some other poets and thinkers, unique. And now to its great seriousness. Loss weighs in this book, is a burden that is hard to bear. In the book's opening, eponymous poem "Red Lanterns," it is obvious, "This week my mother lost her right top lobe / to cancer...." And a more attenuated loss is apparent, "Meanwhile, my son's stepmother called / to say she found something strange / under the bed of my son...." Ray, whose relationship with him is obviously, and obviously unfortunately, long distance, best understands her son's gathering of red lantern poppies and saving them in a jar under his bed. If, by the way, stanza three of this first poem makes you think of the world of Wigginton's *Foxfire* books, this has been much the desired world of Janisse Ray since she penned her first book, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*:

*The berries of poke make ink.
The ashes of oak make lye.
The backs of certain toads
make you hallucinate, if you lick them.
Wormwood distills into absinthe.
Vitamin C in white pine will
keep you alive on a long journey.
Mushrooms can kill you.*

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In Ray's view of the world, it is this close-to-the-land knowledge of life that has the best chance of spiritually saving us, making us more complete by placing us and our cultures closer to nature, where we were for ninety-nine percent of our existence (I think of the subtitle of one of her other books, *Pinhook: Finding Wholeness in a Fragmented Land*). Here is the last stanza of "Red Lanterns":

*Something, of course, has to fill
the hole in my mother's breast
where a lung should be. That clearcut.
What to place there –
A clear jar filled with poppies.*

The poems of *Red Lanterns* express the passion of human relationships and count those losses, too: dear friends, lovers, beloved teachers – and in a way nature does not. The Heron in "Sentencing the Heron" spends its day

*Building altars of pearl snail shells
and dainty carcasses of sunfish.
Offering piety to the alligator,
exonerating the water snake.
Not believing in numbers.
Keeping company
with the moon.*

Nature just is, and exists "as brother to what is," often magnificently. While driving in Montana, in "What I Would Tell at Confession," the poet sees a moose standing in a creek:

*Her coat was rich chestnut,
gleaming wildly, as if she'd newly risen
from the forge of the earth
and stood cooling in the creek.
When she lifted her head,
cress dangled from her mouth.*

*Nothing came between her and fire.
Nothing came between her and loss.
Nothing came between her and nothing.*

Nature endures, sometimes has to work to recombine after human transgressions on it, but doesn't, can't contemplate its losses. Janisse Ray, however, counts its losses, individual and in total. In the previous stanza of "What I Would Tell," the poet remembers a doe killed on a highway: "a stranger helped to ease her from the road. / I had cupped her belly, white and heavy / as the moon, warm, workable as dough." In the poem, "200 Years after Lewis and Clark," she stops to pick up a dead garter snake her tire caught, again driving in Montana, to mourn its death, along with so much else that is gone:

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*If this is the last day of the world
I do not want to die here,
not with the bison gone,*

*and black-tailed prairie dogs in their towns
along the Missouri, gone, like the mountain plovers
that nest-scraped in the grass.*

Reading this poem, I think of "Blue Springs," a poem by C. Dale Young in his book *The day underneath the day*, where he contemplates the beauty of the Blue Springs by considering them geologically and considering they must be a blue left over from the past when the composition of the blue sky sprang out of the earth's beginnings, and then:

*But what about the Spaniards
who came upon this spring before there was*

*a platform lined with inner tubes, before
there were wooden walkways elevated to slow
their impending rot, before there was a faux beach,
its sand stolen from the spring's center?
Did they run in with their clothes on*

convinced this was the fountain of youth?

For Janisse Ray in "200 Years," she is contemplating the beauty of the garter snake she has inadvertently killed and looking to a dim and perhaps not so faraway epochal future. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a founding father of American naturalists, said in a famous essay, *Nature*:

Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. Art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result.

In other words, nature is so large and grand we can hardly effect it. Well, now we are "140 Years after Emerson" -- and so, so much has changed. For ecocritics, Anthropocene -- coined by a biologist at the end of the twentieth century -- is synonymous with disruption, human expansion now a systemic menace. I think fear of this great, epochal threshold is woven through the poems of *Red Lanterns*. Rather than provide examples, I proffer this idea to readers as something to look for in poems that are more intimate: willing, wanting to count and mourn the smallest loss, than any scientific treatise -- and by being this personal, I think their impact is greater, and I believe Janisse Ray is striving for this.

So, yes, there is loss and great fear in *Red Lanterns*, but do not be afraid: again there are many pleasures here, and Ray does leave us with the possibility of hope. In the penultimate poem, "Rant, WonderFarm," she says,

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*Food destroying us.
Nutritionally impotent.
Harming the earth.
Annihilating pollinators....*

*But green is the new black,
the backyard the hottest vacation spot.
The holes in the atmosphere & those in our brains can heal....*

*We're building soil now,
finally building soil:
local soil. Organic soil. Soul soil....*

And a little later in this long and hopeful poem, as if in a nod to Emerson from an America where we *can* impact and transform nature, certainly for the worse, but also for the better:

*Make art.
Live art.
Farm art.
Go home.
Come home.
Savor.*

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